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ABSTRACT

Following a review of the literature of group counselor experiential training, this paper describes a rationale for an experiential growth group model to be used as an adjunct to a masters level group theories course. Such a course is a typical requirement within counselor training programs across the country. The current controversy which surrounds the use of experiential methods in training group counselors is examined (i.e., the problem of the dual role of the educator as growth group facilitator when the experiential group is used for training). Training models are reviewed for their efficacy and extent of use; three groups of models are described. The benefits of participating in experiential group activities are weighed against the role conflicts and risks for both educators and students. The purposes of group experience in a training model are discussed; the rationale and logistics of the model are outlined. A session-by-session outline of the group training model is presented. Session plans include purpose of the session, exercises or activities, a sense of the experience to be gained, and intended outcome for that session. (EMK)

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A Model for Training Group Counselors

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Abstract

This paper describes a rationale for an experiential growth group model to be used as an adjunct to a masters level group theories course. Such a course is a typical requirement within counselor training programs across the country. Educators struggle to provide students a valuable group experience and at the same time respect ethical issues. Therefore, the development of models which resolve or lessen this conflict is imperative. Following a review of the literature, the rationale and logistics of the model are outlined. The paper concludes with a summary of the purpose and activities of each of the model's sessions.

A Model for Training Group Counselors

A current controversy in group counseling surrounds the use of experiential methods in training group counselors. Training future group counselors often includes an experiential growth group (hereafter referred to as experiential group) which meets for several weeks and allows students to become familiar with group process and skills, to experience self-disclosure, and to work on personal issues (Merta, Wolfgang, & McNeil, 1993). One caveat of experiential groups is ethical questions regarding dual relationships where educators serve both as instructors and group facilitators.

Merta et al. (1993) contend that concerns about how to balance two conflicting training responsibilities contribute to inconsistencies in how programs prepare group counselors. First, counselor educators are responsible for protecting the public and the profession from graduates who lack group counseling skills, and those who have personal characteristics which will interfere with their effectiveness. The training program has a responsibility to screen out such persons (Merta & Sisson, 1991). Second, counselor educators must take reasonable steps to avoid any ethical problems associated with dual relationships that occur when an instructor acts as an evaluator of the student's performance as well as the student's group leader.

While training methods have not been widely researched, there has been growing interest in standardizing the training of group counselors. The first response to this interest was the development of specific training guidelines by the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) in 1983. These training guidelines were then revised in 1991 (Conyne, Wilson, Kline, Morran, & Ward, 1993).

The professional standards of ASGW detail both core competencies and specialty competencies in group work (Conyne et al., 1992). The core competencies reflect basic, entry-

The professional standards of ASGW detail both core competencies and specialty competencies in group work (Conyne et al., 1992). The core competencies reflect basic, entry-level skills, knowledge, and clinical experience that all masters-level counselors should possess. The specialty competencies are designed to provide guidelines for more advanced and specialized group work areas. One meets core group work competencies by completing a minimum of a basic course in group theory and at least 10 clock hours (20 hours recommended) of observation and participation in a group experience. Core training in group work involves the acquisition of basic knowledge and foundation skills necessary to enable counselors to be aware of group process phenomena, to be more aware of their own behavior in groups, and to function more competently in groups of which they are members.

Unfortunately, numerous studies have found a discrepancy between the type of training advocated by the standards and the actual training practices of counselor preparation programs (Merta, Johnson, & McNeil, 1995; Huhn, Zimpfer, Waltman, & Williamson, 1985; and Zimpfer, Waltman, Williamson, & Huhn, 1985). Merta et al. completed a study of group training practices in an attempt to provide clarification on this issue. Their study of 236 academic programs found that 77% of the respondents require only one course in group work, although many of these respondents offer additional elective courses in group work. Seventy-five percent of programs simply introduce students to the field of group work, while another 25% of programs indicate they actually prepare students to conduct group work. It appears, therefore, that the majority of counselor preparation programs are not making adequate training in group work a requirement for completion of the program.

The most popular teaching methods are didactic approaches with assigned readings and lectures, followed by role-playing experiences and in-class demonstrations of techniques. Adjunct

experiential groups are the third most used group training activity. Other activities that were not ranked as high include supervised practica, viewing of videotapes or demonstrations, guest lecturers, and observing an actual non-academic working group.

In a 1989 survey of 221 counselor training programs ASGW found that an average of 72% of master's programs and 75% of doctoral programs require learning the ASGW skill competencies within their training programs. In addition, the following skills were found as needing substantially more emphasis: describing/conducting group models, helping to transfer/support member changes, working effectively with co-leaders, conducting follow-up/support of members, and assessing/evaluating group counseling. The area of clinical experience competencies emerged as the greatest area of discrepancy between what is required by the ASGW guidelines and what respondents believed their training program provided (Conyne, et al., 1993). In evaluating their own performance, training programs indicated that providing students with actual clinical experience in group work was their weakest area.

Merta and Sisson (1991) found that current approaches to educating students in group counseling fall into one of three models. These models exist on a continuum from absence of an experiential group, which effectively avoids the ethical issue of dual relationships, to utilizing an experiential group which effectively fulfills the professional responsibilities of training and screening students. In the Model 1 program (12% of academic programs) an experiential group is not used and instruction is limited to didactic methods. Programs in the Model 2 category (27% of academic programs) use an experiential group in which the instructor is not involved and may or may not receive feedback from the group leader about students' attendance and participation. In Model 3 programs (61% of academic programs) an experiential group is used in which the instructor maintains contact with the group by leading, co-leading, or observing the groups.

It is suggested that programs incorporate safeguards into their plans for experiential groups (Merta et al., 1993). These safeguards include making the group voluntary instead of mandatory, providing information regarding the group to students prior to their enrollment in the counseling program, limiting students' self-disclosure in the group process, and excluding students' performance in the group as a basis for evaluation for course grades or promotion through the program.

In a survey, Merta et al. (1993) found that programs typically conduct two experiential groups a year. The experiential groups usually consist of eight members that meet for twelve 90 minute sessions. In addition, the following statistics were found to typically characterize the incorporation of safeguards into training groups: a) 38% of academic programs indicated that they actually train their students to limit self-disclosure, b) 16% of programs indicated that evaluation resulting in a grade or promotion in the program is not used, c) 28% of programs indicated that they provide informed consent prior to enrollment in the counseling program rather than at some later time or not at all, and d) 39% of programs responded that they make experiential groups voluntary rather than mandatory. The survey also revealed that none of the counselor educators use all four safeguards, but nearly half of the counselor educators used at least one safeguard. However, of those programs in which students were at greatest risk for experiencing adverse dual relationships, nearly one fourth did not use any safeguards.

Eighty-eight percent of counselor educators continue to use the experiential group to train students, and many are employing varying models and levels of safeguards to the traditional experiential group (Merta et al., 1993). This means that there is also great variation in the extent to which students are at risk for experiencing adverse dual relationships, receiving poor or inadequate training in group counseling, and the extent to which the public and the profession are

at risk for having incompetent group counselors. The lack of specific guidance on how to best use an experiential group is evidence that counselor educators are struggling with the dilemma of providing adequate training while avoiding ethical issues, and that they need greater awareness of appropriate alternatives to the traditional experiential approach.

The benefits of participating in experiential group activities as a part of group counselor training are well documented. Such a group allows students to self-disclose and work on personal issues relevant to their group work, yet the learning of group process and skills remains the primary focus (Merta et al., 1995). The ASGW (1989) maintain that some form of group experience, whether it be an adjunct therapy group, a nonacademic group, or a supervised practicum experience, is needed for students to develop group leader skills such as appropriate self-disclosure, giving and receiving feedback, empathy, or appropriate confrontation

Yalom (1985) contended that by participating in a group, trainees can arrive at a better understanding of the experience their future clients will have as group members. He suggested that trainees will "learn on an emotional level what one knows intellectually." As trainees experience resistance, fear, anger, and confrontation, they are developing knowledge which they will later call upon when leading their own groups.

Despite the obvious benefits of an experiential component to group leadership training, there are several ethical concerns that must be addressed. The experiential group is under increasing criticism for its potential dual relationship problems. These dual relationship issues stem from instructors serving as group leaders and students as group members in the experiential group, which may create an invasion of privacy or abuse of power. Dual relationships are defined as relationships in which a professional engages in more than one type of relationship with an individual during a given period of time (Bowman, Hatley, & Bowman, 1995). Such relationships

are not inherently unethical, rather it is those situations in which the student could be potentially harmed or exploited due to the nature of the dual relationship that can be considered unethical (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Other characteristics of a training group which may create ethical concerns include: a) requiring students to participate in an instructor-led group without providing informed consent prior to enrollment in the program, b) not training students on how to limit self-disclosure, and c) having students' attendance and performance in the group evaluated in terms of a course grade or promotion through the program (Merta et al., 1993). By not diminishing ethical concerns such as these, problems with dual relationships may arise in experiential groups. Current ethical standards regarding potential dual role relationships may conflict with training which utilizes experiential learning. More specific guidelines are needed to define special considerations appropriate to the training situation in general and to group work training specifically.

Students are in vulnerable positions due to the power differential that exists between themselves and faculty. When a teacher serves a student both as supervisor and evaluator, as well as a facilitator of the student's self awareness, there is a potential for the trainee to have less power and diminished consent to participate in the training activity. Other problems related to dual relationships include a loss of the trainer's objectivity in dealing with the student, and jealousy or resentment among trainees. Many students in such training environments feel a kind of "Catch-22" in which they feel pressured to share personal information but fear that it could be used to evaluate them (Bowman et al., 1995).

In addition to the vulnerable position of students, group educators are also placed in an awkward position in experiential groups. Lloyd (1992) expressed that counselor educators have developed "dual relationship phobia." The training relationship is not identical to the counseling

relationship and using ethical guidelines designed for the client/counselor relationship are not necessarily appropriate for the trainee/trainer relationship. Dual relationships in counselor training are inevitable, and while educators must be sensitive to the needs of students, they must guard also against sacrificing quality counselor education to dual relationship fears.

Corey (1995), Pierce and Baldwin (1990), and Forester-Miller and Duncan (1990) provide some recommendations for group counselor educators. Clear guidelines must be established and communicated to students concerning their rights and responsibilities, grading criteria for the course, appropriate and useful self-disclosure, and risks and benefits of the experience. Students should be given information about the expectations and requirements of such a group experience before entering the training program. Their performance in the group should not be used as a basis for assigning a grade for the course or for entering or continuing in the program.. They should be allowed to participate in goal or topic selection for the experiential activities. Experiential group facilitators must be sensitive to privacy issues and avoid overly invasive questioning. Finally, participating students should not be allowed to lead an experiential group without the presence of a trained staff member.

Other options have been suggested to protect students from unethical practices. According to Merta et al. (1993), the following are alternatives to the traditional instructor-led experiential group: a) doing away with the experiential group and limiting instruction to didactic methods or simulated exercises, b) having a person outside the class conduct the group, c) having a self-directed group, or d) having the leader observe but not lead the group. If the experiential group is used, various safeguards previously discussed may help minimize potential dangers.

Merta and Sisson (1991) call for the training of group counselors to be given greater professional attention, exploration, and debate. In addition, training models need to be evaluated

in order to minimize harm. The authors of this paper would add that student participants should be provided with information on resources for personal counseling, perhaps through the college or university counseling center or community mental health centers. Such resources should be available to provide follow-up support or therapy should issues emerge in the group experience that the student needs to further explore outside the group experience.

The authors of this paper are attempting to take one step toward answering Merta and Sisson's call by formulating the following training model. Currently, this model is being used in a master's level group counseling course. Measures which assess the effectiveness of this model at meeting training requirements and respecting ethical boundaries are being employed. A limitation of this model is a lack of empirical validation of its effectiveness. The model attempts to provide as much control as possible for ethical issues, while still maintaining the training advantages of an experiential group, and meeting the ethical responsibility to protect the public and the profession.

This model has been designed it to be applicable to a diversity of programs. With slight adjustment, it can be used in programs for which participation in an experiential group is voluntary or required. It is also possible that this model can be used in an all day workshop experience. This model provides basic guidelines to maintain a balance between screening and training needs and the avoidance of ethical problems.

The Basic Experience for Training Group Counselors

Purpose

There are three purposes of the group experience. First, participants experience as group members the four stages of group development as outlined by Corey (1995). These include orientation, transition, working, and termination stages. The purpose of the orientation phase of a group's development is to orient members to the purpose, expectations, and format of the group.

When a group is in the transition stage, members often confront conflict with each other and/or resistance to the group's purpose or process. This is often characterized by a period of struggle and confusion about the purpose of the group and members' roles. In the working phase, members develop cohesion and productivity. At this point members tend to feel like the group process is effectively meeting its goals. During the termination phase, members experience consolidation and integration of learning and attempt to gather meaning from their group experience. Feelings about the groups' ending are explored.

A second purpose of the group is for participants to deal with issues and therapeutic factors typically associated with a group experience. Such issues might include: anxiety, trust, risk-taking, confrontation, helping others, identifying with others, self-disclosure, vicarious learning, group floundering, and/or conflict. A third purpose is to provide opportunities for members to practice group leadership skills.

Logistics

This group is designed for master's level students in a university counselor preparation program in which the group counseling course is required for the completion of the degree. Participants will be male and female adults of varying ages, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Participation in the group is voluntary. Those students who do not wish to participate may choose between two other options. These alternatives include: a) participation in another group activity outside the department during the semester with the writing of weekly reaction papers regarding their participation (the instructor can suggest possible group options in the community and on the university campus), b) participation in a non-group option where students

can choose to complete a course related project in lieu of attending any group activity (Appendix A).

Participation in the group is not evaluated or used as a basis for course grades. However, attendance is recorded weekly for those who choose this option. Failure to attend the group regularly results in an incomplete grade for the course. The groups meet once weekly for 90 minutes per session and run for ten sessions. A private, comfortable atmosphere consisting of separate rooms for each small group must be provided. Each room must comfortably seat ten people in a circle.

Members of the class are divided so that there will be no more than ten students in each group. The small groups are facilitated by advanced doctoral-level students who have completed their master's level practicum requirement, as well as the group counseling course, and have experience with group leadership. An additional requirement for facilitators is that they do not have personal interactions with any group members outside the group experience. The course instructor provides supervision for each of the facilitators through weekly meetings to discuss any issues of concern within the groups.

Information regarding the purpose, structure, and expectations of the group experience, as well as the alternative options are provided to participants prior to the start of the group (Appendix A). The authors recommend that programs place a very brief description of the group experience in the graduate catalogue as well (Appendix B). This training model is designed to adapt to various counseling programs in which such group experiences may or may not be mandatory for students. If participation in such an experience is required, it is recommended that consent forms be incorporated into the program's application procedure so that students are aware of the requirements for participation before entering the program.

It should also be mentioned that the following descriptions of activities are general guidelines. The authors have attempted to provide a rough map of concepts to guide the group process. It is believed that, through proper facilitation, students in such a class should take responsibility for the direction of the group's process within the guidelines set forth below. Also, such an experience would be of far more impact than if facilitators set up the sessions with a highly directive, canned approach. The experiential group begins the third week of classes based on a sixteen week semester.

Session 1

The purpose of Session 1 is to help members clarify goals, responsibilities, attitudes, and expectations regarding the group experience. Facilitators attempt to clarify for members the principle purpose of the experiential component of the group course. During this session it is also imperative to discuss the importance of confidentiality.

Group leaders begin by providing an overview of the rationale of the group experience. They emphasize the importance of confidentiality. Facilitators stress that the focus of the group is the development of the members as group counselors. Members should discuss appropriate limits of self-disclosure and division of responsibility. Leaders emphasize the availability of outside support resources for those students who need assistance with personal matters that become apparent through the group process. Members should be allowed to explore anxieties and expectations, as well as risks associated with the group process.

This session is an attempt to provide an experience of the orientation phase of group development in which issues or concerns emerge and are processed. An icebreaker consisting of a depth unfoldment experience is used as an orientation activity. In this activity, each group member

spends a few minutes discussing the factors which led to their decision to pursue counseling as a career. Through this icebreaker, members can become oriented to the group and its members. The session ends by asking group members to prepare for Session 2 by determining a goal relevant to their development as a group counselor. Also, the expectations for members to lead their own groups during sessions 7, 8, and 9 are presented and discussed. (See information under heading titled "Sessions 7, 8, and 9.")

Session 2

The first purpose of Session 2 is to help members formulate and clarify appropriate goals relevant to becoming group counselors and to experience a group goal-setting process. A second purpose is to stress the importance of basic attitudes needed for successful group participation. The facilitator should stress that goal-setting is a vital part of the group therapy process. It is important for group members to understand that clear expectations for group work can prevent unnecessary floundering. Next, the group leader asks each group member to consider goals relevant to his or her development as a group counselor and to discuss how they can use the group process to work towards these goals. Members should spend time processing this experience and discussing any difficulty carrying out the task.

The remainder of the second session focuses on the basic attitudes needed for successful group membership including respect for fellow members, acceptance of others, appropriate methods of confrontation, and use of "I" statements. Orientation-related activities continue throughout session 2. The purpose is to establish group expectations regarding goals and behaviors for both the facilitator and the group participants.

Session 3

The purpose of this session is for members to participate in an exercise designed to increase familiarity and comfort with one another. It is hoped that interactions might become a little deeper as the group moves beyond the orientation phase of activity. The focus is on basic interpersonal skills that foster group cohesiveness such as active listening, appropriate expression of feelings, opinions and feedback, and appropriate self-disclosure. Through the exercise described in the next paragraph, members discover what it is like to disclose information and to feel understood.

The facilitator gives each member of the group a lemon. Members are asked to study their lemon for two minutes and learn its shape, texture, and any other distinguishing characteristics. The members place their lemons on a table in the center of the circle. The facilitator blind-folds each member and mixes up the lemons on the table. Members must then find their own lemon. The purpose of this task is for each person to realize that not all lemons are alike. If members take the time to learn the individual and unique aspects of the lemon, they will find that lemons, like people, are not all the same. Each is special and unique. In addition, the group leader facilitates discussion addressing how the group members' differences and similarities help or hinder group cohesiveness.

In the second component of this session, members participate in a disclosure and discussion exercise on diversity as it relates to ethnicity and culture (Huang-Nissen, 1997). Members are asked to consider the first time in their childhood they became aware of differences in people. They will then be encouraged to discuss these recollections. This exercise is designed to help members examine stereotypes, similarities, and differences. The session closes with members discussing how it feels to disclose information and be heard and understood by others.

Session 4

The purpose of this session is for members to build cohesiveness and to potentially experience conflict. The emergence of group roles, coping styles, and risk-taking behaviors may also likely emerge. The group engages in an activity that stimulates the development of group roles and the experience of struggle, conflict, and working through impasses (Appendix B). The activity brings to light individual styles of coping in stressful situations.

Session 5

The purpose of this session is for members to experience feelings associated with the further development of cohesion within the group. At the beginning of the session, the facilitator informs the members that they will be expected to carry this group on their own. They are instructed, "This is your group. What you do with this time is up to you. I will simply observe the process." This portion of the group lasts one hour with the remaining half-hour devoted to processing the experience and feedback. Such processing might focus on which members, if any, took charge of the situation. The group should process the following questions: a) what other roles or behaviors emerged among members; b) what were some of the thoughts or feelings experienced by members when no direction was provided by the facilitator; and c) what are some methods group leaders can employ to handle therapy situations that seem directionless or uncertain.

This session ends by asking group members to come prepared the following week to discuss issues related to the working stage of groups such as trust, honesty, being directive, being confronted, taking risks, and making changes. Members are requested to disclose an issue and relate it to their development as a counselor.

Session 6

The purpose of this session is for members to experience the cohesion and productivity associated with the working stage of group development and experience the process of self-disclosing and receiving feedback. Members self-disclose the issue they were asked to decide upon in Session 5. This is the issue they consider relevant to the working stage of the group process. Members will then provide feedback. The group will have a present or immediate experience focus and should provide a trusting atmosphere in which members can honestly share their concerns relevant to issues associated with the working stage. Members are asked to share such issues as they relate to their development as counselors.

Sessions 7, 8, and 9

The purpose of these sessions is to allow members to co-lead a group. Members experience leading a group and the pressure of working within a time limit. Each group member pairs with another member to lead a group for sixty minutes. Each dyad will base their group session on a theory of group counseling (eg. psychodynamic theory). The remaining group time is dedicated to unfinished business, such as making decisions about using what they have learned and dealing with unresolved issues that might have emerged during the group process. Enrollment will determine the number of sessions needed to insure that each dyad receives a full hour of leadership time. Group leaders may need to adjust the number and/or length of these sessions due to time constraints. The instructor should announce this assignment during the first class session of the course. Students are expected to consult with the instructor prior to these sessions to ask any questions and to secure approval for their plans for the group.

Session 10

The purpose of the final session is for members to experience consolidation and integration of learning, and to gather meaning from their group experience; all critical elements of the termination stage of a group's development. Students are to discuss their experiences as members of the group and will be given opportunities to discuss any unfinished business or separation issues as needed.

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Appendix A

An Example of Information for Student Participants

Students must complete the course "CPSY 844: Theories of Group Counseling". This course includes an experiential growth group. Participation in the experiential component of this course is optional.

The experiential group is facilitated by advanced doctoral-level students who have completed their master's level practicum training and are supervised by the course instructor. Those who choose to participate will not be evaluated in any way on their participation in the experiential component, however, attendance will be recorded and students must complete the experience or an alternative to receive a course grade.

Participation in the weekly experiential group will focus on the stages of group process and the here and now. Participation will consist of attendance and participation in 10 weekly group sessions and four or five of the 10 sessions will be co-led by two students on a rotation basis. Participation will consist of being open and supportive in group, actively observing the group process, practicing group skills, and co-leading one group session. Participants will be encouraged to work on skills to help them become more effective as group members and prospective group leaders. Major emphasis will focus on the here and now. Group members, group leaders, and the course instructor will stress full confidentiality to all participants with the exception of legal or professional directives to disclose. Co-leaders will meet with the facilitators and instructor before leading the group to discuss previous group meeting(s) and plan for future group meeting(s). Your participation in group will not affect your evaluation in the course. You are expected to complete a journal summarizing your reactions to the group experience to be turned in periodically to your instructor.

The benefits of participating in experiential group activities as a part of group counselor training are well documented. The Association for Specialists in Group Work (1989) maintain that experiential group participation is needed for students to develop group leader skills such as appropriate self-disclosure, giving and receiving feedback, empathy, or appropriate confrontation

It is understood that, for various reasons, a student might not wish to participate in such a group experience. A decision to not participate will be respected and alternatives to participating in such an experience are outlined below.

Alternatives to Participation in the Experiential Group

A student may choose one of the following alternatives to participating in the experiential group. A student must decide on an option by the third class meeting.

Alternative One. You can participate in a group experience of your choosing, separate from the experiential component connected with the class. If you elect this option it is necessary that your group provide an ongoing group experience of at least 10 weeks duration where individuals are able to share in the here and now. The only requirement is that you attend each session as a participant, not as a facilitator, and write a brief evaluation of what that experience was like for you. You are expected to complete a journal summarizing your reactions to the group experience to be turned in periodically to your instructor. The leader of the group will send a letter to the instructor verifying your attendance.

Alternative Two. You can write an introspective paper designed to look at the effect groups have on your own personal growth and development and how groups have affected your interaction with others. This paper should be a minimum of 20 typed double spaced pages.

Alternative Three. You can create an independent project which is essentially equivalent to the other three options. It should be related to learning about groups and the relationship of groups to your personal growth and development as a professional.

Appendix B

Questioning Group Values and Norms (Anonymous)

Description of Activity. A recent breakthrough in science led to the discovery of a planet which is almost an exact duplicate of earth. The only difference between this newly discovered planet and earth is that there are no intelligent life forms. Each group will form a colonization party to settle on this new planet. There are one thousand members of the colonization party which come from many different countries and cultures.

Instructions. Your group has been asked to recommend a list of the five most important rules to govern sexual conduct and relationships both on the space journey and on the new planet. Discussion does not need to include questions of enforcement-assume that all rules can be enforced.

Possible rules to consider:

1. Who can have a child?
2. What must one be able to do to have a child?
3. What form of sexual activity is permitted and between whom?
4. Will there be marriages?
5. Can unmarried adults live together and do these relationships consist of two people or is more than two people also permitted?
6. What are the terms of ownership for possession and finances for individuals and other relationships?
7. What activities are punished?
8. Who shall practice birth-control methods and what type?